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Reason and Inspiration in Islam

Edited by TODD LAWSON

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too, many isolated Nizārī groups were assimilated over time into the predominant Twelver community of their respective milieus. In Syria, the Muḥammad-Shāhīs did not resort to *taqiyya* practices in any guise and, therefore, they fully preserved their identity. But by the final decades of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, when they had been left without a manifest Imam for almost a century, the bulk of the Syrian Muḥammad-Shāhīs acknowledged the Qāsim-Shāhī Nizārī Imamate, then represented by Sulṭān Muḥammad Shāh Aga Khan III (1885–1957). A small minority, based in Qadmūs and Maṣyāf, refrained from switching their allegiance; and they developed the belief that their last known Imam or one of his successors was, in fact, the Mahdī who had gone into concealment. This community, numbering a few thousands, are still awaiting the reappearance of their Imām-Mahdī. These points were explained to the author by ʿĀrif Tāmir (1921–1998), the most learned member of this minority Nizārī community known locally in Syria as Jaʿfariyya or Suwaydāniyya.

In the meantime, the *daʿwa* preached on behalf of the Qāsim-Shāhī Nizārī Imams had become quite successful in South Asia, where the Hindu converts became generally known as Khojas. The *dāʿī*s, or *pīr*s as they were more commonly designated in India, did not resort to Twelver disguises as practised by their co-religionists in Safawid Persia and by the Muḥammad-Shāhī Imams after Shāh Ṭāhir in South Asia. Instead, they used distinctively acculturated conversion tactics which were designed to maximise the appeal of their message to Hindu audiences, using Hindu idioms and mythological themes to express their Ismaili teachings. The resulting indigenous Nizārī tradition developed in the Indian subcontinent, known as Satpanth or 'true path', is reflected in the religious literature of the Nizārī Khojas, devotional hymns known as *ginān*s, which are quite distinct from the Nizārī literatures produced in Syria, Persia, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The experience of the Muḥammad-Shāhī Nizārīs in India, and to a lesser extent that of the Persian Qāsim-Shāhī Nizārīs, clearly shows that the principle of *taqiyya* may indeed prove to be a double-edged sword; while in the short-run its circumscribed and judicious use will undoubtedly assure the safety of an endangered religious minority, its extensive and long-term applications may well lead to the disintegration or total loss of the original religious identity of the dissimulating community.

Notes

1. For overviews of the Nizārī state and the early Nizārī *daʿwa*, see Marshall G. S. Hodgson, 'The Ismāʿīlī State', in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, ed. J. A. Boyle (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 422–482; F. Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 324–434, 669–699, and 'Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ and the Origins of the Nizārī Ismaʿili Movement', in F. Daftary, ed., *Mediaeval Ismaʿili History and Thought* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 181–204.

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Fatimid empire in Egypt,[5] the Ismaili Imams dispatched their proponents, the *dāʿīs*, to the Indian subcontinent for the propagation and exposition of the *Satpanth*, the Path of Truth. These *dāʿīs* sought to summon humankind to a recognition of the spiritual supremacy of the Prophet's family. This activity continued when the Nizārī branch of the Imams moved to the fort of Alamūt in 1094 and was maintained even after the Mongol onslaught wiped out this Ismaili state in 1256. Among the *dāʿīs* dispatched were several figures whose names appear in the traditional list of *pīr*s, or chief representatives of the Imams. They were second only to the Imam himself in the Ismaili hierarchy. The Ismailis attribute to certain of these *pīr*s, along with a few of their family members and descendants, works that are styled 'gināns'. This corpus of esoteric literature, written in both prose and poetry, numbers some 1,000 extant compositions. The gināns range in length from three verses to literally hundreds of pages and deal with a wide array of subjects including divine love, cosmology, meditation, ritual practice, eschatology and ethical behaviour.[6]

While earlier scholars have noted the dual significance of the term ginān among the Ismailis as referring both to their sacred literature as well as to gnosis, a comprehensive study of the purport and use of this expression in the ginān tradition itself has yet to be carried out. It is this void that the present article hopes to fill.

For the most part, the gināns will be allowed to tell their own tale, either in direct translation or in paraphrases of selected passages. Virtually the entire extant ginānic corpus has been analysed for this study. All references to the over fifty original compositions cited are to be found in the notes. By studying the use of the term ginān in the gināns themselves, an attempt will be made to understand how the tradition defines itself.

The word ginān and its variants *gyān* and *gnān* are ultimately derived from the Sanskrit root *jñāna*, which Seyyed Hossein Nasr has tellingly translated as 'supreme knowledge'. Nasr further notes that the 'term *jnāna* implies principial knowledge which leads to deliverance and is related etymologically to gnosis, the root *gn* or *kn* meaning knowledge in various Indo-European languages including English'.[7] Wladimir Ivanow, generally considered the father of modern Ismaili studies, comments on the particular employment of this term by the Ismailis of the subcontinent: 'It is used in the sense of *the* knowledge, i.e. the real and true, as the Arabic Ismaili term *haqāʾiq*.'[8] In view of both the conceptual and etymological relationship between the words ginān and gnosis, they will be used interchangeably in this article; though the term ginān will be used exclusively when the poetic compositions themselves are referred to, for to use the other term would require the invention of an expression such as 'gnosis-text'. On the whole, however, wherever one of the terms is used, the other is equally implied.

As the traditional symphony is often divided into four movements, so is this study of the Symphony of Gnosis composed of four sections. The *sonata* is an exploration of the soul's emergence from the womb of gnosis. The Ismaili texts hold

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Saloko Moṭo in *Saloko moṭo tathā nāno*. Mumbai, 1904.
Saloko Nāno, in *Saloko moṭo tathā nāno*. Mumbai, 1904.
Surabhāṇ nī Vel, in *5) Girathane Ginān: 100*, vol. 1. Mumbai, 1966 VS/[c.1910].

1. *Saloko Moṭo*, v. 105.

2. In this connection see Christopher Shackle and Zawahir Moir, *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans* (London, 1992), p. 17. Of course, the word ginān is also used in this sense by certain other groups such as the Imām Shāhīs. However, these are splinter groups that have split off from the parent Ismaili movement and so the usage of the term ginān in this specific sense can still be considered to be uniquely Ismaili.

3. *Sat Veṇī Nānī*, c. 3.

4. Shafique N. Virani, 'Ahl al-Bayt', *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed.). ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit, 2005), vol. 1, pp. 198–199.

5. Some Indic Ismaili sources, such as the *Ghaṭ Pāṭ Duā* of Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, date the period of this propagation activity even earlier, to the time of Imām Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar. There is some support for this assertion in the testimony of the 13th-century author, 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā-Malik b. Muḥammad al-Juwaynī. See S. M. Stern, 'The Early Ismāʿīlī Missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurasan and Transoxiana', *BSOAS*, 23 (1960), pp. 85–87. Stern, however, has expressed suspicion about this information. Nevertheless, we do know reliably from the Fatimid jurist al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's *Iftitāḥ al-daʿwa*, ed. W. al-Qāḍī (Beirut, 1970), pp. 45, 47, that immediately upon establishing an Ismaili base in Yemen in 883, Abu'l-Qāsim b. Ḥawshab 'Manṣūr al-Yaman' dispatched his nephew, al-Haytham, to spread Ismailism in Sindh.

6. The best introduction to the history of *Satpanth* Ismailism remains Azim Nanji's *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar, NY, 1978). The later history should be supplemented by the present author's 'The Voice of Truth: Life and Works of Nūr Muḥammad Shāh, a 15th/16th Century Ismāʿīlī Mystic' (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1995). The earlier period has been studied in Tazim Kassam, *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns of the Satpanth Ismāʿīlī Muslim Saint, Pīr Shams* (Albany, NY, 1995). Aziz Esmail's *A Scent of Sandalwood* (London, 2002) and the collection of Ali Asani's previously published articles, entitled *Ecstasy and Enlightenment* (London, 2002), are two recent contributions to the field that contain up-to-date bibliographies.

7. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 7, 50 n. 14.

8. Wladmir Ivanow, 'Satpanth' in *Collectanea* (Leiden, 1948), vol. 1, p. 2, n. 1.

9. *Hojīre parāṇī jāre tuṃ gīrabhā thān vasanto*, vol. 5, p. 117, v. 1.

10. In this study, ginānic words whose origin may not be immediately apparent are followed by a gloss containing the classical Arabic, Persian or Sanskrit form, as the case may be.

11. *Juṭhīre dunīyā tame kāṃi bhulo*, vol. 1, p. 118, v. 2; *Gurajīe rachanā rachāveā*, vol. 2, p. 118, v. 4.

12. *Satane mārage chālīe*, vol. 6, p. 42, v. 6; *Man Samajāṇī*, c. 5.

13. *Sat Veṇī Moṭī*, c. 20.

14. *Kesarīsiṃh sarup bhulāyo*, vol. 6, p. 35, vv. 1–3.

15. *Ṭāḍhuṃ ṭāḍhuṃ mīṭhaḍuṃ bolīe*, vol. 4, p. 95, v. 1.

16. *Dharam murat paelā gur bharamā pichhāṇo*, vol. 1, p. 143, vv. 8–9; *Sum nahī tuṃ jāg saverā*, vol. 2, p. 141, v. 2.

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